

## RIFS-Blogpost

**Datum:**

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**Projekt:**



# No Consensus, No Treaty: Why a Global Plastics Treaty Has Not Been Reached]



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Lone negotiator: Ambassador Luis Vayas Valdivieso, chair of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC).

**! Zum Aktualisieren der Textelemente, Zitation markieren und dann F9 drücken !**

**Zitation:** [Einhäupl, Paul; Del Savio, Linda] (2025): [No Consensus, No Treaty: Why a Global Plastics Treaty Has Not Been Reached] – RIFS-Blogpost, 20.08.2025.

**URL:**



## 1.1 UN negotiations in Geneva on a global plastics treaty

**For the time being, there will be no international, legally binding instrument to curb plastic pollution. Despite negotiations stretching well into the night and far beyond the planned schedule, the delegates failed to reach an agreement. The differences were too great, the issues too complex, and the timeframe too short to resolve the many points of contention.**

After little to no progress had been made in the official working groups, the last two days of negotiations took place behind closed doors, excluding observers from the proceedings: In an attempt to break the deadlock, the Chair of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC), Ambassador Luis Vayas Valdivieso, held bilateral meetings and consultations with regional groups such as the Pacific Small Island Developing States and the Group of Latin American and Caribbean countries. His efforts were not rewarded.

Despite the protracted informal talks extending deep into the night, the mood among observers remained surprisingly upbeat—likely because many interpreted the drawn-out negotiations as a sign of possible convergence among parties.

However, the revised draft text presented by Ambassador Vayas just a few hours before the final plenary session on the morning of 15 August 2025 differed only marginally from the document that had been rejected by a clear majority of states two days earlier. While the topics of plastic production and health received somewhat greater attention—responding to demands from numerous states—the revised draft still lacked binding reduction targets on plastic products, waste, and pollution, and global limits on virgin plastic production.



The core focus of the proposed treaty remained largely unchanged: downstream waste management and the remediation of plastic pollution in the (marine) environment. Binding obligations—particularly regarding plastic production, product design, and a financial mechanism—were left bracketed. What many countries from the Global South, the EU, and Oceania considered insufficiently ambitious, crossed red lines for several oil-producing countries, whose economic interests are closely linked to resource extraction needed for virgin plastic production.

## 1.2 Time constraints and procedural aspects impede negotiations

The widely diverging positions of the delegations were a key reason why a treaty could not be concluded. However, time constraints and the structure of the negotiation process also played decisive roles. The short time frame of just three years left little room for a gradual rapprochement or for procedural mechanisms to resolve fundamental disagreements over production caps or the scope of the treaty. Without a shared understanding of the treaty's purpose, negotiators struggled to define clear priorities and sequence debates accordingly.

At the same time, it was not possible to set aside fundamental differences in order to achieve progress where consensus was within reach. These deficiencies in the process likely stemmed from underestimating the complexity of addressing plastic pollution. They also highlight a fundamental tension between the urgency to act in the face of the plastics crisis and the time needed to build trust and achieve progress in multilateral negotiations. In the absence of structured process and well-defined conflict-resolution tools, parties attempted to embed fundamentally opposing positions—for



example, on adopting a full life cycle approach or the protection of national trade interests—into various sections of the draft treaty. Too many issues were negotiated simultaneously, leading to an overloaded and fragmented text.

Participants waiting at the UN Headquarters, Palais des Nations in Geneva, for the plenary on a treaty to tackle plastic pollution and marine litter.

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### 1.3 The result: a bloated and fragmented text

Multilateral environmental agreements often take decades to reach maturity. Trust is gradually built through iterative compromise, creating the conditions necessary to bridge deep divides. The consensus-based decision-making process further exacerbates this challenge—and not just in the negotiations on a plastics agreement—as it enables individual states to block ambitious proposals supported by a clear majority. This structural weakness—repeatedly criticized by observers since the start of negotiations in 2022—is also a recurring obstacle in international climate negotiations.

These shortcomings raise fundamental questions about the future of the INC process. It remains unclear whether and how the negotiations will continue. Another round of negotiations seems conceivable. However, both procedural reforms and structural innovations would be necessary to achieve a successful outcome. Organizing the negotiations around clearly defined milestones and priorities, rather than a rigid timeline, could help to create space for trust-building, sequence debates more effectively, and facilitate incremental progress. This would address at least some of the challenges outlined above. After all, multilateralism remains urgently needed to confront global challenges of this scale. Whether the multilateral process can overcome the procedural constraints of consensus decision-making remains uncertain.

**What is certain, however, is that plastic pollution in ecosystems—including the marine environment—continues to worsen. It does not wait for a treaty.**



